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Posted on Thu, Jul. 28, 2005

## House to approve \$286.4 billion in highway and transit money for all states

JIM ABRAMS

Associated Press

**WASHINGTON** - Congress is on the verge of approving \$286.4 billion in highway and mass transit money for the states, sending lawmakers home for their summer vacations bearing big gifts of roads, bridges and jobs.

The House was to vote on the six-year measure late Thursday, its last major act before recessing for the six-week summer break. The Senate is to follow suit Friday.

With the president's expected signature, passage of the act would end an almost two-year impasse in which Congress and the White House battled over the proper spending levels and states were at odds over how best to divide up the billions in federal highway money.

The bill would direct federal funds to thousands of projects requested by members. According to Sen. Jon Corzine, D-N.J., the Garden State stands to receive \$5.6 billion for highway funds, and New Jersey will also receive an additional \$2.43 billion for mass transit.

New Jersey lawmakers began touting projects they fought for, but decried the stripping of a "pay-to-play" amendment from the bill, which would have prohibited the practice of awarding government contracts to political contributors.

The nation has been without a new act since September 2003, when the 1998-2003 law, funded at \$218 billion, expired. Since then, Congress has had to pass 11 temporary extensions to keep money flowing to the states for construction projects.

That delay has disrupted schedules for new projects and prevented the hiring of tens of thousands of construction workers.

The final funding level for the 2004-09 period is nearly \$100 billion less than lawmakers and transportation officials have said is necessary to make real improvements in the nation's deteriorating, congested and unsafe roads and bridges.

But the White House has insisted that Congress show fiscal discipline, saying it cannot go along with unbridled spending at a time of large budget deficits and rising military costs.

"It's not going to solve the nation's congestion crisis, but it is a step in the right direction," said Ed Mortimer, director of transportation infrastructure at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

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## THE DAY IN PHOTOS

Even before the final vote, lawmakers were boasting of projects they had won for their states or districts.

Rep. Robert Menendez, D-Hoboken, announced \$167 million for northern New Jersey projects, including \$104 million for the Liberty Corridor, which leads from the port of New York and New Jersey along railways, roadways and waterways. Among the other projects Menendez touted was \$9.6 million to build a walkway and bicycle path along Sinatra Drive near the Hudson River in Hoboken.

Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr., D-Paterson, announced he had secured \$500,000 for a public transportation national security study to evaluate the value public transportation systems place on national security in project planning.

Corzine and fellow Democrat Sen. Frank Lautenberg announced more than \$306 million for road and transit projects, including \$50 million to upgrade PATCO, the passenger rail service linking South Jersey and Philadelphia.

Corzine also said two highway safety provisions he authored to strengthen drunken driving laws and address distracted driving issues cause by cell phones and other electronic devices were set to be approved.

The Finance Committee also inserted several new tax provisions, raising \$495 million over 10 years by funneling some taxes on kerosene used as diesel into the Highway Trust Fund, while exempting limousines over 6,000 pounds from the gas guzzler tax, at a cost of \$46 million over 10 years. It also caps the 10 percent excise tax on fishing rods at \$10.

The legislation guarantees that by 2008 every state will get back at least 92 percent of what it contributes through federal gas taxes to the Highway Trust Fund. The current minimum rate of return in 90.5 percent, and the demand of "donor" states for a more equitable division of the federal highway money has been one of the major sticking points in coming up with a compromise bill.

## ON THE NET

Information on the bill, H.R. 3, can be found at <http://thomas.loc.gov/>



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